Developing College Students’ Strengths: Positive Psychology On Campus

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Ideation
Strategic Learner
Achiever
Futuristic
Noel Academy for Strengths-Based Leadership and Education  
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Engaging Learners, Inspiring Leaders  

[website link: www.apu.edu/strengthsacademy]
Goals for this Workshop

• To introduce the strengths development process – building strengths of competence as well as strengths of character
• To highlight effective ways of building college students’ strengths
• To discuss the effectiveness of strengths development programs on college campuses
IN PAIRS . . .

- Introduce yourself
- What do you love about your work?
Just think about...

What if every student could experience that same feeling on campus?

What if students experienced that same fulfillment of being at their best *while learning*?
Higher Education’s Track Record

• Only about half of students who start college finish with a degree

• Low-income, African-American, Native American, and Latino/a students are less than half as likely to graduate as Asian, Caucasian, and high-income students
An Increase in Diverse Learners

• 80% of the growth in new student enrollments in the next decade will come from low-income students and students of color
• Diverse learning styles and needs of students

A key advantage will be the ability to help diverse learners recognize and capitalize on the talents they bring to the learning environment
The Response of Higher Education?

• “Survival of the fittest”

• “Deficit remediation”
The Dominant Paradigm

- There are certain skills required to be successful in college
- At entrance, we need to measure students’ abilities in these key areas
- Students need to spend most of their time in their areas of weakness, in order to achieve
The Problem?

Spending most of your time in your area of weakness—while it will improve your skills, perhaps to a level of “average”—will NOT produce excellence

• This approach does NOT tap into student motivation or lead to student engagement
• The biggest challenge facing us as educators: how to engage students in the learning process
Engaged Learning

A positive energy invested in one’s own learning, evidenced by meaningful processing, focused attention on what is happening in the moment, and active participation in learning activities.

Schreiner & Louis, 2006
Positive Psychology

Areas of emphasis:

The fulfilled individual

The thriving community
### Positive Psychology on Campus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fulfilled Individual = Student Success</th>
<th>Thriving Community = Institutional Effectiveness</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>Student satisfaction</td>
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<td>Engagement</td>
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<td>Persistence to graduation</td>
<td>Campus climate</td>
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<td>Personal development</td>
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<td>(Kuh et al., 2005)</td>
<td>Retention &amp; graduation rates</td>
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<td>Successful alumni</td>
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Applying Principles of Positive Psychology to Higher Education’s Concerns

How do we engage our students in the learning process and help them become self-directed learners?

How do we motivate students?

How do we help students achieve success—in college and beyond?

What enhances the perceived quality of our institutions?
A Shift in Perspective

FROM

Surviving

Who you are and where you’ve been

Target the weakness and fix it

Failure prevention

TO

Thriving

Who you can become and where you’re going

Target the talent and build on it

Success promotion
“Individuals gain more when they build on their talents, than when they make comparable efforts to improve their areas of weakness.”

Clifton & Harter, 2003, p. 112
Strengths

Competence

Character

Community

Individual Excellence
Strength =

(Talent + Energy) × (Knowledge + Skill)
Start with Talent

... a naturally recurring pattern of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied.

--Clifton & Harter, 2003

Ways of processing information

Ways of interacting with people

Ways of seeing the world

Habits, behaviors, or beliefs that lead to greater effectiveness
Methods to Identify Talent

- Questions to ask students:
  - What did you learn with the greatest ease in high school?
  - What did your teachers compliment you about?
  - What do your friends say they like best about you?
  - What was your favorite assignment?
  - What subjects do you enjoy studying the most?
  - What fascinates you?
  - Tell me about a time in your life when you accomplished something you were proud of.

- Previous successes, things that seem to come naturally, learning that occurs with little effort – all are indicators of talents that can be developed into strengths

- Instruments specifically designed to measure talents
Outcomes from Using an Instrument to Identify Strengths

• Provides a common language to talk about strengths
• Validates and affirms students’ experiences
• Jumpstarts the conversation and provides a springboard for discussion
Strengths of Competence:

The *Clifton StrengthsFinder™*

- Online instrument
- Identifies **5 signature themes of talent** that can be developed into strengths
- 34 possible themes
- Excellent evidence of construct validity
- 3-month test-retest reliability among college students averages .70 across the 34 themes
- Used with over 4 million people in 20 languages – and 500,000 college students
- [www.strengthsquest.com](http://www.strengthsquest.com)
StrengthsQuest

• Student textbook to accompany the Clifton StrengthsFinder instrument
• Strengths development in academics, relationships, leadership, and careers
• Action items for each theme in each area
• Strengths themes also tied to Holland vocational types
• Available in hard copy or online
• Access code included
Strength =

(Talent + Energy) x (Knowledge + Skill)
Strengths: Not Just “What You’re Good At”!

Strengths can lead to success, but they also

– Energize you – they “strengthen” you
– Create positive emotions which open up the channels for learning and complex problem solving
– Lead to greater investment of time and effort because they are self-reinforcing
Strength =

(Talent + Energy) x (Knowledge + Skill)
Develop Strengths

By refining our dominant talents with skill and knowledge, we can create strength: the ability to provide consistent, near-perfect performance in a given activity.

--Clifton & Harter, 2003
How does a talent become a strength?

Talent $\times$ Investment = Strength

Investment is a MULTIPLIER of talent!

Investment includes time spent practicing, developing skills, & building knowledge

Louis, 2008
An example of strength development

**STRENGTH:** Helping doctoral students design their dissertation study

**SKILLS**
- Statistical analysis
- Practice collecting and analyzing data

**KNOWLEDGE**
- Of research design
- Of higher education
- Of psychology

**TALENT THEMES**
- Ideation
- Strategic
- Achiever
- Learner
- Futuristic
Top Signature Themes

General US Population
- Achiever
- Learner
- Relator
- Responsibility
- Strategic
- Input
- Maximizer
- Focus
- Arranger
- Woo

College Student Population
- Adaptability
- Relator
- Restorative
- Includer
- Input
- Empathy
- Achiever
- Learner
Achiever

• Hard working
• Stamina
• Busy, long “to do” list
• Highly productive
• Goal-oriented
• Highly motivated
Learner

- Love the process of learning as much as what is actually learned
- Want to continuously improve
- Learning builds confidence
- Thrive in dynamic work environments and short-term projects
Relator

- Enjoy working hard with close friends to achieve a goal together
- Deep relationships with a small circle
- Pulled toward people they already know
- Comfortable with intimacy
- Self-disclosing
Responsibility

- Dependable
- Others count on them
- Keep their word
- Take psychological ownership for anything they commit to
- Good follow-through
- Conscientious
- No excuses
Execut ing

Knowing how to make things happen

Achiever
Arranger
Belief

Consistency
Deliberative
Discipline

Focus
Responsibility
Restorative

Rath & Conchie, 2009
Influencing

Reaching a broader audience

Activator

Communication

Command

Competition

Maximizer

Self-Assurance

Significance

Woo

Rath & Conchie, 2009
Relationship Building

The glue that holds us together

Adaptability
Developer

Connectedness
Empathy
Harmony
Includer
Individualization
Positivity
Relator

Rath & Conchie, 2009
Strategic Thinking

Keeping us focused on what could be

Analytical
Context
Futuristic
Ideation

Input
Intellection
Learner
Strategic

Rath & Conchie, 2009
Predictors of Engaged Learning

• 15% of the variation in *Engaged Learning Index* scores can be accounted for by students connecting their learning to their individual strengths and learning to apply their strengths to academic tasks

• Connectedness, Input, and/or Learner in top 5 themes is predictive of Engaged Learning

• Achiever, Focus, Input, and/or Learner in top 5 themes is predictive of Academic Self-Efficacy
Strengths of Character: The VIA Survey

• The VIA provides a common language for a strengths-based approach to character development – www.viacharacter.org

• 6 overarching **virtues**
  – Core characteristics valued by moral philosophers and religious thinkers
  – Recognized and valued across cultures and over time (universal)
  – Crucial to human thriving

• 24 **character strengths**
  – The psychological components of the virtues – ways of achieving the 6 virtues
  – Contribute to fulfillment
  – Morally valued in its own right, whether it leads to positive outcomes or not
  – Displaying a character strength never diminishes others in the vicinity
  – Fairly stable across time and situations (traitlike)
  – Institutions and rituals exist in society to encourage the display of these strengths
  – “good character” = 1 or 2 strengths within a virtue

(Peterson & Seligman, 2004).
VIA

The 6 Virtues

- **Wisdom**: cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge
- **Courage**: emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal
- **Justice**: civic strengths that underlie healthy community life
- **Humanity**: interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others
- **Temperance**: strengths that protect against excess
- **Transcendence**: strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning

(c) Noel Strengths Academy
VIA Research with College Students
(Lounsbury et al., 2009)

• **Predictors of College Satisfaction:**
  Hope, Social Intelligence, Self-Regulation, Fairness
  \((R^2 = .22, p < .01)\)

• **Predictors of GPA:**
  Persistence, Love of Learning, Humor, Fairness, Kindness
  \((R^2 = .17, p < .01)\)
Building Strengths

1. **Identify** the natural talent themes
2. **Affirm** those themes with significant others
3. **Develop** the themes by learning knowledge and practicing skills – invest energy and effort
4. **Apply** the strengths to new or challenging situations
5. **Combine** the strengths with other talents you have—and with the talents of others—to produce excellence
But what about weaknesses?

• Difference between a “non-strength” and a “weakness”
• Weaknesses interfere with your own ability to perform to expected levels—or interfere with others’ ability to do their work
• We can teach students to apply their talent themes to areas in need of improvement (ex: failing student with “relational” talents)
Strengths Development Cycle

Who am I?
Strengths Awareness

Who do I want to become?
Strengths Development

How do we work together?
Community Strengths

How do I relate to others?
Other Awareness
Strengths Awareness

Gives individuals an opportunity to focus their attention on what is already inside them – what they do well, what they have to contribute, how they see the world and relate to others.
The Paradox of Strengths

• We often take them for granted.

• We do not see them as being particularly distinctive.

• Our strengths have sometimes gotten us into trouble!

• We have been criticized for using our strengths.

• We wish we had other strengths.
It’s all about strengths development!
Nature of Many Existing Strengths-Based Initiatives

Characterized by:

– Short term, stand-alone content
– Talent identification and affirmation

– Most “strengths development programs” do little to help participants *develop* their strengths
Two Strengths-Based Strategies

**Talent Identification**
- Approach widely used in higher education
- Identify & affirm existing talents
- Who you *are*
- Talents produce success

**Strengths Development**
- Approach intended by The Gallup Organization
- Identify & affirm talents as precursors to strengths
- Who you can *become*
- Effort to develop talents into strengths produces success

Louis, 2008
Mindset

☀ Beliefs about the nature of human attributes and their responsiveness to developmental efforts (Dweck, 2006)

**Fixed Mindset**

- Ability is innate, trait-like
- Unresponsive to change

**Growth Mindset**

- Ability is malleable, dynamic
- Can be developed through effort

**Example:**

Intelligence is something very basic about a person that can’t be changed very much

You can always change how intelligent you are
## Why Does Mindset Matter?

### Fixed

- **Ability is static**
  - Appear smart
  - Avoid
  - Give up easily
  - Viewed as fruitless or as indicative of no ability
  - Fear negative feedback; “I’m not good at that area”
  - Underperform relative to ability

### Growth

- **Ability can be developed**
  - Increase ability or skill
  - Embrace
  - Persist during setbacks
  - Viewed as the path to mastery
  - Learn from feedback; use to develop new strategies: “I didn’t use the right strategy”
  - Reach increasingly higher levels of achievement
Conceptual Link Between Mindset & Strengths-Based Initiatives

• Mindset can be altered

• Positive labels can be detrimental if they lack emphasis on the role of effort

• How does this relate to strengths-based approaches?
Research Design

• First-year college student participants \((n = 388)\)
Impact of Varying Strengths Program Types on Mindset

Fixed Mindset
Mindset

Growth

Before

After

(Fixed) 2.84
3.55
3.57

Talent Identification

Strengths Development

Control
Strengths-Based Student Success

What do I want out of college?
Who do I want to become?

Where have I succeeded in the past?
Where am I succeeding now?
Past and current successes help students see how to apply their strengths to the new challenges
In Pairs – Try This Yourself!

Think of a recent success you’ve experienced

- Talents
- Skills
- Knowledge
- Effort

Now think of a challenge you are facing – how could you apply your talents, skills, knowledge, and effort toward that challenge?
• We don’t abandon all the other practices we know work—we simply provide a motivational foundation for adding the necessary skills and knowledge

• *The student becomes a partner in the learning process!*
Ways of Using a Strengths-Based Approach on Campus

- Academic Advising
- First-Year Seminar
- Remedial Courses
- General Education Courses
- Leadership Programs
- Residence Life Education
- Career Planning Process
- Mentoring Programs
- Tutoring
- Learning Communities
- Diversity Training
- Counseling Center
- Staff Development – strengths-based teams
- Institutional Decision-Making
- Performance Appraisals and Faculty Development
What is a “strengths-based” course?

- **Instructor**
  - is teaching from his or her own strengths
  - encourages and assists students as they identify their own strengths
  - teaches students to apply strengths to course assignments

- **Assignments**
  - provide variety and choice, allowing students to leverage their strengths
  - create learning teams that capitalize on diversity of strengths
  - are designed to identify and build students’ awareness and development of their strengths

- **Students**
  - are given the resources to identify their talents and to work outside of class to develop them into strengths

**Purpose**: to motivate and engage students in their own learning process, so that they are able to reach optimal levels of achievement
A Four-Year Approach to Strengths Development

• First-year students
  – *StrengthsFinder* assessment for all incoming students
  – Introduction of strengths philosophy in orientation
  – Strengths-based first-year seminar
  – Learning communities or linked courses that are strengths-based
  – Focus on relationships, then academic success
  – Use of peer mentors
  – One-on-one advising/goal-setting sessions with each student (individualizing; relational context)
  – Learning teams, choices in assignments
A Four-Year Approach to Strengths Development

• Sophomores
  – Career issues
  – Special focus on goal-setting in advising
  – Peer leadership and mentoring opportunities
  – Service learning and/or cross-cultural contexts
  – Connecting to the major—research with faculty
A Four-Year Approach to Strengths Development

• **Juniors**
  – Internships
  – Strengths deployment
  – Campus leadership teams

• **Seniors**
  – Job search, grad school admissions
  – Capstones
  – Strengths autobiographies
  – Mentors to student leaders
Strengths

Competence

Character

Community

Individual Excellence
Strengths of Community

Individual

Membership
IDENTIFY my strengths

Influence
Ownership
APPLY my strengths to make a contribution

Institutional

Relationship
RELATE and REFRAME how I see others in light of their strengths

Emotional Connection
Partnership
ENGAGE my strengths to work with others

Belonging

Interdependence
Impact on a Sense of Community

As students learn about their strengths and the strengths of others, they are more likely to engage -- and they are more likely to experience a psychological sense of community on campus – a powerful predictor of their satisfaction with the institution and their persistence to graduation.

(Schreiner & Juillerat, 2004)
Characteristics of a Strengths-Based Campus

• Commitment to talent development
• Knowledge of who their students are and how they learn
• Investment in people
• Hallmark is a spirit of collaborative engagement and a strong sense of community
Creating a Strengths-Based Campus

• **Faculty development**: teaching and advising from a strengths perspective

• **Student life programming** focused on strengths development and thriving

• **Staff development**: service excellence and team building around their strengths
Teamwork from a Strengths Perspective

• What talents and strengths do each member bring to the team?
• What tasks do they enjoy most? What energizes them?
• What brings out their best—what do they need from me?
• Where would they like to partner or delegate to manage weaknesses?
Evidence that strengths-oriented programming makes a difference

DOES IT WORK?
Why A Strengths-Based Approach Promotes Student Achievement

Strengths Awareness → Positive Emotions → “Broaden and Build” complex thinking and response repertoire → Self-Efficacy → Motivation to excel → Engagement in learning → Motivation to excel → Engagement in learning → HOPE

Strengths Development provides new pathways to goals → HOPE

Apply strengths to areas needing improvement → Greater likelihood of success
Why a Strengths Approach Affects Persistence

Strengths awareness and application → **achievement**

Recognizing strengths in others and how my strengths work in relationships → **sense of community** → satisfaction with the college experience

Learning to apply my strengths to new situations or challenges → **coping skills**
Impact Studies

• Qualitative studies with *StrengthsFinder*
  – Interviews of students in the U.S. and the U.K.
  – Interviews and focus groups with faculty
  – Content analysis of journaling exercises

• Quantitative studies
  – Correlational design – regression analyses and SEM
  – Time series design
  – Random assignment/control group
Qualitative Results: Outcomes of Strengths-Based Programming

- Awareness of strengths as an epiphany
- Personal confidence
- Academic confidence
- Motivation to achieve
- Sense of direction and purpose
- Optimism
- Reframing

- More positive view of self
- Intent to use and develop strengths
- Improved interpersonal relationships
- See people differently
Strengths-Based Learning
Cantwell, 2005
Academic Self-Efficacy in First-Year Students

![Bar chart showing Academic Self-Efficacy for Control and Strengths Group. The Strengths Group has a higher mean score of 4.2 compared to the Control Group with a mean score of 4.05. The result is statistically significant at p < .05 with N=926.](chart.png)
Perceived Academic Control

Beliefs about the degree to which effort will make a difference in academic outcomes

- Tends to drop during transitions
- Affects GPA and persistence

"My success is up to me"

(Perry, Hall, & Ruthig, 2005)
Impact of Strengths Intervention on Perceived Academic Control (Louis, 2008)
Strengths-Based Advising Embedded Within a First-Year Course

8 treatment sections and 8 control sections experienced the same course elements
- Course content
- Instructor as advisor
- Learning teams throughout the semester
- Personal success plans

Significant differences in:
- Satisfaction with total advising experience (5.68 vs. 4.65, p < .001)
- Perceived helpfulness of personal success plan (5.64 vs. 5.17, p < .05)
- Course evaluations (5.70 vs. 4.74, p < .001)
- Perception of instructor (5.99 vs. 5.48, p < .01)
- Cumulative GPA after one semester and after one year
  First semester: 2.84 vs. 2.51 (p < .001)
  First year: 2.77 vs. 2.43 (p < .01)
- Retention after one year
  77.6% vs. 65.9% (p < .05)

(Schreiner, 2000)
Hope

Clear goals
Pathways – strategies to reach goals
Agency – motivation to use strategies

(Snyder, 2002)
Strengths Self-Efficacy, Hope, and Sense of Vocation/Calling

(Phillips, 2009)
Sense of Community on a Two-Year Commuter Campus

Campus Climate Intent to Reenroll

Control Group
Strengths Group

$p < .000; \text{Schreiner, 2008}$
Student Satisfaction

• Three controlled studies
  – Cantwell (2005) – first-year Public Speaking course

• Significant differences between strengths groups and control groups in:
  – Overall satisfaction with the college experience
  – Course satisfaction
A strengths-based approach to student learning encourages engagement

- Connects to what students already have inside them
- Builds on their prior experiences and successes
- Generates positive emotions
- Emphasizes a relational context and interdependence
- Fosters a sense of competence and confidence
Strengths Development at APU

- Specific academic programs:
  - All first-year students take *StrengthsFinder*
  - Strengths development as part of the first-year seminar
  - Teacher education programs are strengths-based
  - Doctoral higher education is strengths-based
- Staff development programming to create strengths-based teams
- All new faculty take CSF and participate in strengths-based faculty development
- Faculty workshops, monthly faculty luncheons
- Career planning
- Transfer students are encouraged to take the CSF
- Not all aspects of the university have bought in!
Adapting a Strengths-Based Approach to Your Own Campus

• Work within your “sphere of influence” and from your own strengths
• Determine outcomes in advance
• Plan the evaluation before the implementation
• Invest enough time to make a difference
• Ownership and buy-in
• Have the courage to step up
“I think when you know who you are and you have a good grasp on that, you can be okay even with what are not your strengths--because other people have those strengths and you can learn how to work well with other people and say ok, I have this weakness, but that’s your strength. And so we can kind of team together, and good things happen....”

--First-year student at APU
Before You Leave!

• Pick up a **brochure with a code** to take the *Clifton StrengthsFinder*

• Information on **12-unit doctoral certificate** in strengths-oriented higher education

• **Continuing education** certificate in strengths approach to higher education leadership and student success – workshops in Chicago, LA, and Dallas in 2009-2010

• **Faculty Development Workshops** on engaged learning; strengths-oriented approaches to teaching and learning

  [www.apu.edu/strengthsacademy](http://www.apu.edu/strengthsacademy)
For More Information

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Engaging Learners, Inspiring Leaders

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